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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL DINNER WITH VICE FOREIGN MINISTER LE VAN BANG

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang and the Ambassador discussed a wide range of issues during a cordial August 3 dinner. The Ambassador used the occasion to underscore U.S. concerns concerned over governance and human rights, and raised the cases of imprisoned individuals eligible for amnesty. The Ambassador also noted slow progress on a new embassy compound and establishment of a Peace Corps program, and pressed for improved GVN response on consular access and improved control over the adoption process. The GVN is still seeking a bilateral meeting with President Bush at UNGA. Le Van Bang revealed that he is being forced to retire "in a year or two" rather than serve as Vietnam's ambassador in Beijing, and blames this turn of events on the influence of the pro-China lobby within the elite here. End Summary.

A LONG FRIENDSHIP, MANY ACHIEVEMENTS

¶2. (SBU) Vice Minister Le Van Bang and his wife hosted a farewell dinner for Ambassador and Mrs. Marine on August 3. Noting that he had known the Ambassador since 1988, VM Bang said it had been a wonderful opportunity to work with him in Vietnam over the past three years and to see so much progress made in the bilateral relationship. The Ambassador expressed his appreciation for the work of the Vice Minister and his MFA staff in promoting the bilateral relationship. He noted that it is a reflection of how that relationship has expanded that he has had over 15 formal farewell calls at the level of Vice Minister or above.

STILL SEEKING BILAT FOR PRIME MINISTER DZUNG

¶3. (SBU) VM Bang said that Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem will accompany Prime Minister Dung to the United States for the upcoming UN General Assembly session. He noted that Vietnam was seeking a meeting with President Bush on the margins of UNGA, adding that he knew from his own experience as Vietnam's UN Ambassador that this would be difficult, but not impossible to arrange.

¶4. (SBU) Ambassador Marine said such a meeting would indeed be difficult, given President Bush's tight schedule in New York. If this or other bilateral meetings are held, however, these would be a good opportunity to demonstrate concrete progress on issues such as those raised by Senator Leahy in his March letter to Vietnam calling for closer engagement on concrete efforts to enhance governance, rule of law and anti-corruption efforts in Vietnam. If Vietnam does not get things right on rule of law, the Ambassador told Bang, it risks economic problems as investors go elsewhere.

15. (SBU) VM Bang said the GVN is studying the issue of rule of law and the only issue is whether it will implement changes faster or slower - to do it faster, it will need the help of friends like the United States. In particular, Vietnam wishes to avoid a "Philippines situation," in which endemic corruptions saps the vitality of the economy. The Ambassador noted political aspects of the problem, predicting that the Communist Party will lose the support of the people if governance fails to improve. Improving governance is in Vietnam's fundamental self-interest.

VIETNAM AS A MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT

16. (SBU) VM Bang said Vietnam wants its society to develop quickly, but equitably. The Ambassador noted that in economic terms the country is already "capitalist." In terms of models for development, VM Bang said Vietnam is looking to Japan 30 years ago, Korea 20 years ago or perhaps Singapore today. Vietnam did not want to follow the development models of Thailand, the Philippines or even Indonesia, which all suffer from "separatist issues." He added that Vietnam had already, of course, rejected the paths being taken by Burma and the DPRK.

17. (SBU) When Vietnam finally won its wars of liberation, the world community did not appreciate its accomplishment, VM Bang said. Now Vietnam hopes that its renewal of the country and its peaceful development may serve as an example for developing countries in Africa and Latin America. During a recent visit to multiple nations in Latin America, the VM said, officials in Peru and Chile had expressed their interest in attracting Vietnamese investment. Perhaps in 10 years, he said, Vietnam could follow the South Korean model of investment in other countries.

PROGRESS IN HIGHLANDS, NOT ON DEMOCRACY

18. (SBU) VM Bang said he had visited the Central Highlands for

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VM SUPPORTS REQUEST TO SCATTER AMCIT ASHES IN VIETNAM

16. (SBU) The Ambassador also raised the case of June Ward, the widow of the late Dr. Larry Ward, who had requested that his ashes be scattered in Vietnam near the clinic he built here as a reflection of his love of the country. VM Bang said he had received the Ambassador's letter on the issue and supported her request.

VM BANG TO RETIRE: A VICTIM OF PRO-CHINA ELEMENTS

17. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's question, Vice Minister Bang said that the rumors he will not be going to Beijing as ambassador are true. The excuse is that he has exceeded the mandatory age of 60 for retirement from the ranks of vice minister. The reality is that others over 60, such as Vice Foreign Minister Le Cong Phung, will probably not be forced out (Phung is expected to become Vietnam's new ambassador to the United States later this year). Bang blamed the decision on "pro-China elements" in the leadership. Beijing was not happy that Hanoi was planning to send a person so closely identified with the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, Bang asserted, and Beijing allies in the Vietnamese government engineered the decision. Probably as a face-saving gesture, Bang will stay on the payroll for one or two more years. He hopes to be engaged in strategic planning for the ministry.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The Prime Minister's recent decision to enforce retirement

age regulations is playing out in a number of ministries around Hanoi. Many exceptions are being sought, but it appears that formal approvals are being granted only slowly, if at all. As for Bang, he is clearly deflated by the turn of events. He emphasized that, while not being forcibly retired immediately, that he is turning over the reigns of U.S.-Vietnam relations to Assistant Foreign Minister Phan Binh Minh, who - along with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem -- will accompany Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to New York in September.

MARINE